

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Caroline Frizell

Working Across Modalities in the Arts Therapies: Creative Collaborations

Edited by Tasha Colbert and Cornelia Bent

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This edited volume, 'Working across Modalities in the Arts Therapies', offers a window into cross modality working and transdisciplinary practice within and between the arts therapies and related disciplines. The book adds to a growing body of literature that addresses interdisciplinary work with a focus on the place where the individual arts therapies meet and where the arts therapies meet other healthcare and psychological interventions, such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and nurses, for example, in a "joined up approach that adheres to core principles while accessing skills unique to each discipline"(p: xxii).

Historically, the arts therapies have offered an accessible medium for individuals who might find it hard to access traditional mainstream therapeutic services. The contributors to this edited volume illustrate how it is possible to think outside of a discipline-specific box in the service of clients who represent areas such as homelessness, sex offending, eating disorders, refugees and learning disabilities. The writing argues for the potential of cross-modal and transdisciplinary practice in the struggle to find effective interventions.

The book is structured in two parts. The first, entitled “cross-modality practice and research in the arts therapies” demonstrates how therapeutic provision can be enhanced when practitioners from two or more different arts therapies collaborate. The second part, entitled “transdisciplinary practice and research in the arts”, reaches outwards to include collaborations between arts therapists and other health-care professionals.

The book demonstrates how this meeting of modalities in the therapeutic process can challenge the assumptions that we make as practitioners, sharpening the focus on discipline-specific elements of the work and opening our minds to the commonalities and the differences in non-verbal, creative processes. The arts fulfil a basic human need for creativity, expression and communication. The idea of the arts as separate, isolated phenomenon, stands contrary to the developmental process, in which children shift fluidly between movement, image, sound, role play and story. It is, in fact, the interconnectedness of different art forms that underpins spontaneity and creativity of expression. The importance of the symbolism inherent in the creative process, common to all arts therapies, can be seen to offer a container for difficult and unconscious material that perhaps cannot be spoken. For example, we learn how “clay brings solidarity; it comes from the earth and through its innate qualities can absorb and contain strong emotions.” (p.114). We see how the combination of art materials and musical instruments become “objects for reflection” (p.5). We discover how the interconnectedness of music and dance is a fundamental phenomenon in the intervention (p.31).

This book poses an implicit question about how arts therapists might be in danger of becoming trapped in their modality, clinging to the discipline-specific resources and concepts like badges of identity. On the one hand, the practitioner who has an intimate relation with his or her modality can employ a frame to support the containment of difficult material. This expert knowledge can allow a client's creativity to be witnessed with integrity and support the therapist to facilitate an exploration of unknown territory within a particular modality. On the other hand, the challenge of accommodating and working

with another professional who brings an alternative modality can increase our curiosity in the face of the unknown. This challenge can demand that we “wrestle with both the foundations of our approaches and our view of ourselves as clinicians.” (p. 125). As practitioners, we might fear that our specialism will get lost (p. 32). However, throughout the book, theoretical perspectives and case studies illustrate how the bringing together of modalities can “extend the work into an extra dimension.” (p. 52). For example, Guney, Atik & Lundmark in their chapter ‘Holding Hope’ demonstrate how a multi-media approach was particularly effective at a sensory level through bodily sensation, visual imagery and sound. This cross modality working allowed for different styles of expressing, receiving, assimilating and accommodating relational experience. The observational potential is maximised, as clients reveal different parts of themselves through different media. Collaboration between practitioners with diverse skills sets and competencies creates a space for the birth of something new, opening doors for creative spontaneity.

A collaborative approach increases the potential to communicate experiences. A music therapist and drama therapist (Gillian Downie and Robin Wiltshire), discover how their similarities support them to remain grounded in their differences in their work with learning disabled clients (p. 79). Furthermore, Céline Butte and Diana Whelan bring together music and dance within the therapeutic process, increasing the potential for the “plurality of meaning-making” (p. 66) in the complexity of the clinical material. They write of the potential of deep inner listening that can be cultivated in a trans-modal approach, as “improvised music and movement.... offer a unique intermediary platform” (p. 66) towards becoming present to the here and now of the therapeutic encounter. Meghan Charles and Judith Sanoon’s chapter illustrates the potential of cross modality working to support the negotiation of issues of conflict in the group (p. 83) as they bring together their respective specialisms of art and music. In working together, one modality seemed to support a subtext for the other, thereby expanding potential nuance and dimension to contain turbulent dynamics. In their chapter evaluating their practice in an acute ward in a medium secure forensic hospital, Cathy

Goodwin and Alison Ramm bring together drama and art, noting how professional differences manifest as “a matter of emphasis rather than radical differences.” (p. 52). Their chapter unveils the meeting place, which holds both tension and potency as two modalities are brought together. This collaborative approach, creates opportunities for the therapists to model “peer positioning” (p. 17) within a dynamic interplay, as they work within a modality that isn't their specialty.

The potential for joined up thinking is further expanded in the second half of the book that considers transdisciplinary approaches. Authors Kate Rothwell and Laura Henogulph illustrate how a collaborative approach furthers the “possibility and scope of therapeutic change”. (p. 127) as art therapy and psychology come together to support individuals within a sex offender treatment program. There is potential to create a “circle of support”, as well as opportunities for triadic thinking in a process that holds the “duality of two disciplines”, whilst also “operating as one mind” (p. 136). The professions each have unique identities and there is also common ground in terms of values, beliefs and practices shared across modalities and across professions.

This sharing of practice can expand our horizons as individual, specialized, practitioners. This book calls us to a shoreline between one place and another, where we are challenged to move beyond a position of being “precious or obfuscatory about our own disciplines”, (p. 131) and to open our curiosity. The coming together of different disciplines offers the potential to expand the dimension of therapeutic provision, to widen our frame of reference and open to alternative ways of thinking.

The co-working relationship is inevitably central to the book's theme. In itself, co-facilitating unearths commonalities and differences that need to be worked through in terms of professional experience and approach, as well as gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and culture. At times, the focus settles into a discussion about the dilemmas and benefits of co-working and this might have been delineated more clearly from the issues presented by cross-modal and trans-

disciplinary working. Overall, however, the writing engages in a lively exploration of working with interconnectedness and collaboration within a spirit of curiosity and openness towards discovering new ways of working.

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